

THE SOUND OF SURF

by

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Abstract

“The Sound of Surf” is a chronological examination of music surrounding and associated with American surf culture over the course of the twentieth century. I also explore the roots of surf music starting where surfing first began: Hawaii. I examine ancient Polynesian cultures and surf-related music from a social standpoint as well as a more technically musical standpoint. I discuss key figures and events that are responsible for the popularization of Hawaiian culture on the American mainland and investigate what fell and falls under the categorization of surf music over the consequent decades. I have organized my research so as to simulate a historical journey through the places where surfing and music intersected. Possible future formats include long-form print journalism, a radio program and/or extensive liner notes in accompaniment to an audio compilation. Song titles and basic information serve as chapter headers so that the essay may either stand alone or be complemented by audio selections. More detailed song information can be referenced in the bibliography where the entries are listed according to the artist(s) name.

“He Mele He’e Nalu” ancient Hawaiian chant (cover by Sandii, 2006)

“Aloha Oe” by Queen Liliuokalani, 1878 (cover by Elvis Presley, 1961)

The first written evidence of surfing may have been a journal entry penned by British Captain James Cook while he was exploring the Polynesian Triangle in 1777. He observed the natives on the beach and described what he saw in the water. Drawing a comparison to music, he wrote,

Neither are they strangers to the soothing effects produced by particular sorts of motion, which in some cases seem to allay any perturbation of the mind with as much success as music ... I saw a man paddling in a small canoe so quickly, and looking about him with such eagerness on each side, as to command my attention. At first, I imagined that he had stolen something from one of the ships, and was pursued; but, on waiting patiently, saw him repeat his amusement.¹

Wave riding is estimated to go as far back as 3000 BC and the origins of surfing can be traced to various parts of the globe, including the Polynesian islands, Peru and Africa. According to *The Encyclopedia of Surfing*, surfing as we know it today is primarily a Polynesian invention. “Stand-up surfing (as opposed to bellyboarding or kneeboarding) likely began around AD 1000 and was soon deeply integrated into Hawaiian culture, practiced by commoners and royalty, young and old, men, women, and children. Villages were nearly deserted when a good swell arrived, as everyone took to the waves.”² If surfing began in Hawaii, then surf music must also have its roots there.

¹ Donald Matthew Langford, “Good Vibrations: Southern California Surf Culture” (master’s dissertation, California State University, 2000), 8.

² Matt Warshaw, *The Encyclopedia of Surfing* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003), xi.

Primary musical instruments used by ancient Hawaiian's included the conch, drums made from gourds, wood and coconuts, sticks, pipes and flutes made from bamboo, and pebble-filled small gourds for shaking and rattling. Dance was also considered a form of accompaniment. The Hawaiian word "mele" has come to define what we understand as "song" although it translates more literally to "poetry."

According to Dorothy Kahananui, author of *Music of Ancient Hawaii*, "In ancient Hawai'i, poetry was destined for musical recitation."³ Meles served several purposes including entertainment, communication, and proof of lineage or royal rank. A personal chanter accompanied most members of royalty. Typically, the lyrical content was more important than the melodic or harmonic content. "The Hawaiian 'sang' because he had something to say for which there was no other adequate means of expression. Always however, the poem came first, and for melody, a few tones sufficed—often only two or three."⁴ The latter also applies to the musical traditions of many primitive cultures.

"He Mele He'e Nalu" is a surfing mele. The chant is also known as "A Name Chant for Naihe." Naihe was the son of one of King Kamehameha's principal warriors. He was known for his athleticism and surfing skills and stirred jealousy among fellow chiefs. The legend says that the jealous chiefs plotted his murder by making a secret rule, while Naihe was out surfing, that no surfer could return to land until he heard his name chant from shore. Naihe travelled with a name chanter, but she was asleep on the beach.

³ Dorothy M. Kahananui, *Music of Ancient Hawaii: A Brief Survey* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1960), 5.

⁴ Ibid.

Finally, she awakened and chanted him back to safety.⁵ The mele presented here today is a shorter and more modern version of the original, and has been reprised by a Japanese singer named Sandii, who released her version of “He Mele He’e Nalu” in 2007.

“He Mele He’e Nalu” transcription:
(English translation by Mary Kawena Pukui and Alfons L. Korn)

The big wave, the billow rolling from Kona,
makes a loincloth fit for a champion among chiefs.
Far-reaching roller, my loincloth speeds with the
waves.
Waves in parade, foam-crested waves of the loin-
covering sea,
make the *malo* of the man, the high chief.
Stand, gird fast the loincloth!

Let the sun ride on ahead guiding the board named
Halepo
until Halepo glides on the swell.
Let Halepo mount the surf rolling in from Kahiki,
waves worthy of Wakea’s people,
waves that build, break, dash against our shore.

Now sea-spray of surfing looms into sight.
Craggy wave upon wave strikes the island
pounded by a giant surf
lashing spume against a leaf altar, Hiki-au’s
temple.
At high noontime this is the surf to ride!

Beware coral, horned coral on the shoreside.
This channel is treacherous as the harbor
of Kakuhihewa.
A surfboard smashes on the reef,
Maui splits, trembles, sinks into slime.
Many a surfman’s skin is slippery,

⁵ Mary Kawena Pukui, ed. and trans., and Alfons L. Korn, ed. and trans., *The Echo of Our Song: Chants and Poems of the Hawaiians* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1973), 37.

but the champions of chiefs skims into shore un-
drenched
by the feathery flying sea-spray of surfriders.

Now you have seen great surfs at Puna and Hilo!⁶

The Europeans who later followed Cook to the Hawaiian Islands halted many native cultural traditions and carried diseases that would have a devastating effect on the indigenous population. Protestant values dismissed forms of leisure, including surfing. In his dissertation, Langford postulates, “Hawaiian’s would not have been able to bring surfboard riding to the height it had achieved during that (prior) time with the constraints of a Protestant ideology later exacted upon them. Surfboard riding could only emerge from a culture so tuned into the virtues of leisure.”⁷ As the newcomers stifled the sport of surfing, indigenous music faced similar imposition. “The relative decline of surfing in the later nineteenth century (until its revival and commercialized exploitation in more recent times) ran parallel to the falling away, to the point of dissolution, of other native traditions, such as those of ancient dance as represented in the sacred hula.”⁸

But with the arrival of new cultures came new musical instruments. The most common belief is that the ukulele came to Hawaii with Portuguese settlers, who migrated in largest numbers during the later part of the nineteenth century. Helen Roberts wrote *Ancient Hawaiian Music* in 1926 and points to the four-stringed “braga” instrument as the Portuguese equivalent for the Hawaiian Ukulele. Portuguese immigrants carried five-

⁶ Ibid., 36-41. (Based on Emerson, *Unwritten Literature: The Sacred Songs of the Hula*, 35-36.)

⁷ Langford, “Good Vibrations: Southern California Surf Culture,” 10.

⁸ Pukui and Korn, *The Echo of Our Song: Chants and Poems of the Hawaiians*, 36.